

Electric Grand Prix

FIA Formula E at the Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach

Story and photos by Jan Wagner - AutoMatters+

For decades, race fans have enjoyed the month of May in Indianapolis, which culminates with the world famous Indy 500. Now, added to that tradition, there is truly the month of April in Long Beach. In terms of the number of different major races, the largest motorsports event in all of Southern California—and arguably the best motorsports value for fans, is surely the Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach.

Our Long Beach coverage features an international race series in its first season, called FIA Formula E. This, the sixth round on the series' schedule and the second in the US (the first was held in Miami), is known as

the Long Beach ePrix.

FIA stands for Federation Internationale de l'Automobile (www.fia.com). Founded in 1904, the FIA is the governing body for world motor sport. Several of the better known, major international motor sport race series that it sanctions include Formula 1, the World Rally Championship, World Endurance Championship, World Touring Car Championship, World Rallycross Championship and, now, the Formula E Championship.

Additionally the FIA is the driving force behind the Commission Internationale de Karting (CIK-FIA), its stated object being "to develop, promote, coordinate and regulate karting-related activities around the world." Karting is where many of today's top racing drivers got their start.

By the way, did you know that the first kart

was built and the first kart race was held in 1956 in Southern California? You can read about it at www.cikfia.com, in the Inside CIK-FIA history section.

Formula E represents a major shift in motor sport as we know it. According to Alejandro Agag, its CEO, Formula E is "the world's first fully-electric racing series." Forget any notion that you may have about the cars being a bunch of re-bodied, open-wheel Nissan Leafs racing around a glorified go-kart track. Formula E racing is the real deal.

Visually the cars resemble those that race in Formula 1, the world's premier open-wheel racecar series. Many of the Formula E drivers have raced in Formula 1.

Just as Formula 1 represents the pinnacle of technology for cars that are powered by what are now essentially hybrid internal

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(Lead photo at left) Daniel Abt leading Lucas di Grassi through Turn 3. • (Above) Preparing the car for the race. • Carrying a front wing. • (Below) Michael Andretti, Team Principal of Andretti Formula-E Team. • Alain Prost, four-time F1 World Champion.



combustion and electric “power units,” Formula E pushes the technology envelope for all-electric motive power.

Ensuring that Formula E cars will go the distance and are quick on the track requires that they store a lot of electrical energy on-board, at least for the time being. As a short-term measure while battery and charging technology continues to evolve, the racers each drive two cars: one during the first part of the race and the other for the second.

Unlike the original 24 Hours of Le Mans car race, where drivers leapt into their cars and took off without properly securing their safety belts, in Formula E there is a required minimum time in the pits, to ensure that the drivers change from their first car to their second safely.

Incredibly, this year’s Long Beach Formula E race was FREE to spectators. If their enthusiasm was any indication, they really appreciated that and turned out in large numbers, filling the grandstands that were already set up for the rest of the Grand Prix a couple of weeks later.

The race course was a somewhat shortened version of the regular Long Beach street circuit—there being no point in having extra-long, battery-draining straightaways. Watching the cars race wheel to wheel, and weaving their way through tight turns, was very exciting.

In addition to the power plant—actually because of it—fans will notice a major difference between Formula E racing and traditional auto racing. Instead of having to endure a race-long assault on our hearing that would render normal conversation all but impossible, Formula E cars are quiet. Those of us who grew up racing radio-con-



Race winner Nelson Piquet Jr., China Racing Formula-E Team. • Jaime Alguersuari, Virgin Racing Formula-E Team. • Bruno Senna in Turn 3, Mahindra Racing Formula-E Team. • Racing into Turn 4.

trolled cars or indoor go-karts will find the mechanical whine of Formula E cars very familiar and entirely appropriate for race-cars. Add to that tire squealing in the corners. The ability to talk to each other during a race is a very welcome change.

This first Long Beach Formula E race was a huge success. It was won by former Formula 1 driver and current Red Bull Global Rallycross driver Nelson Piquet Jr. of Brazil, driving for the China Racing Formula-E Team. ■

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Award-winning **JAN WAGNER** has been writing professionally since 1979 and an avid photographer for as long as he could hold a camera. He was a television writer/producer in his native Alberta, before transferring to his current home in San Diego.

